



Maggie Karner:

Living the Faith in the Shadow of the Cross

by Pam Knepper, News Editor

For Maggie Karner, her faith has always been a part of who she is and how she has lived her life. Raised in a Christian home in Indiana, Maggie entered her young adult years by earning a liberal arts degree from Purdue University and beginning a career in public relations shortly after marrying her husband, Kevin, who was a seminary student at Concordia Theological Seminary in Fort Wayne, Indiana.

“If someone would have told me when I was younger that I would eventually become the wife of a pastor, I would have laughed. But Christ was again allowing me to live out my faith by supporting my husband in his ministry and the people He had been called to serve.”

“While my husband was at seminary, I was fortunate enough to start my career by helping advertise the good work being done at the local Lutheran hospital. I liked the idea that I could not only promote what the hospital was doing to care for the body, but I could live out my faith by being a witness of Christ to those who were being treated there. It was a good fit.”

When Maggie and Kevin became the parents to daughters Mary, Heidi and Annie, Maggie chose to become a stay-at-home mother and settled into the life of a busy family. Eventually, when her husband’s vocation called the family to a place with no Lutheran school, Maggie and Kevin took on the responsibility of homeschooling their girls. “God provides us with many roles, but sometimes, as a young wife and mother, it was difficult for me to prioritize all my vocations the way I should have because of the different demands on my time.”

Those demands were stretched even further in 2001 when Maggie was asked to become the Director of Life Ministries for The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS). “At that time, Rev. Matt Harrison, our current LCMS President, was head of the Synod’s World Relief and Human Care department. Because of my public relations background and passion for the sanctity of life, he thought this would be the perfect position for me.”

While serving as Director of Life Ministries, Maggie submitted a grant to the Lutheran Women’s Missionary League (LWML) to help fund a Christian family counseling center in St. Petersburg, Russia. At the 2007 Sioux Falls LWML Convention, the grant was approved. Since then, the center has been instrumental in providing women with certified job training, educating them about pregnancy, and helping them find housing and proper health care. “During the Soviet years, abortion was the first choice women used for contraception. Fortunately, in more recent years, the Russian government has seen the negative impact abortion has had on their culture,” explained Maggie. “The society has zero population growth, and they simply don’t have enough workers. So they have made some changes, which have included giving tax breaks to families who have three kids or more. Simply because of economic goals, they are now promoting life, rather than encouraging the ending of it.”

In 2010, Maggie’s role was expanded to include health ministries for the LCMS. As the Synod’s Director of Life and Health Ministries, one of Maggie’s duties included traveling on medical mercy mission trips to all corners of the globe. “One of the things we always stressed with our mercy teams was to prepare people for

what they were going to see. They were going to witness suffering like they had never seen before. The way we prepared people was by stressing the theology of the cross,” Maggie explained. “We would remind them that Christ walks through suffering with us. He understands. He doesn’t like it, but we live in a fallen world, and we have to be the body of Christ in those places of suffering for the people we have been called to serve.”

Always looking for ways to live out her faith and bring the love of Christ to others, Maggie once again reached out to LWML. During the 2011–2013 biennium, LWML approved a grant to fund the creation of a pregnancy center in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The facility provides counseling, care, and brings the Gospel message to pregnant women as they make God-pleasing decisions to keep and nurture their babies.

“The center in Kuala Lumpur has truly been a gift from God. In Malaysia, which is a Muslim-dominated society, the church was seeing an epidemic of ‘baby dumping.’ They discovered that Muslim people believe it is less of a sin to leave their babies in the street rather than kill them through abortion,” explained Maggie. “At the center, if the women cannot care for their child, then they also help them find adoptive families who will love and nurture these children. The work we are doing in Malaysia is truly a way we are living out our faith in Christ, and I thank the women of the LWML from the bottom of my heart for giving us the resources to do just that.”

A lifelong Lutheran, Maggie knows that Christ tells us we will all have crosses to bear. Oftentimes, these crosses are very different than we ever imagined they’d be. Maggie’s cross came in the spring of 2014, when she was diagnosed with a stage-four glioblastoma multiforme brain tumor.

“A week before the diagnosis, I had flown out to California to take care of my daughter who had been in a car accident,” remembered Maggie. “On the flight out I fainted, but thought it was because I was tired. However, when I got home, I fell down the stairs in my house and the next day woke up with slurred speech.” Knowing that something was very wrong, she went to her doctor who ordered an MRI scan, which showed a mass on her brain.

“I was absolutely immobilized by fear. I had never had surgery before and now my first

experience was going to be surgery on my brain,” remembered Maggie. “However, I also knew that God uses people in their vocations to care for us, and that is exactly what my neurosurgeon did. Before I headed into surgery, he came in and told me he would take care of me and, by God’s grace, he did.”

Since her surgery, Maggie has lived with the reality of weekly rounds of chemotherapy and radiation, along with MRIs every two months. “At this point, we are just trying to keep the cancer at bay for as long as possible,” explained Maggie. “This type of cancer can harbor many rogue cancer cells that are tucked away in my brain and, if surgery or medicine can’t reach them, then they will start their own colonies. The regular treatments help keep things under control. Perhaps someday, I might be able to participate in a clinical trial that will help me and find a cure for others.”

Knowing her cancer will probably end her life, Maggie says God graciously provides her with what she needs to live out her faith even when battling a terminal illness. “God gives us wonderful tools because he understands suffering so well. I have my daily devotions, God’s Word, and the Sacraments that are administered to me at my church. These tools give me what I need to carry on, even when I want to give up,” Maggie explained. “I also have the expressed love and prayers of so many friends in the faith and, in response, I try to look for people in my daily life who also have crosses to bear and be a witness of Christ’s love to them.”

Maggie also finds comfort from her family and friends. “On Sunday morning, my husband is my pastor. At home, he is my husband. My entire family has been a wonderful pillar of strength for me. They know there is nothing they can do with the cancer, but they can be there to love and support me. And they do!”

Along with extended family and friends, Maggie and her family have also found great support from the New England District–LCMS, in which her husband serves. “They helped provide a pastor who could assist with visiting the many shut-ins of our church so my husband would have more time to care for me,” explained Maggie. “The District has been absolutely fabulous. They have been very intentional about serving clergy and their families.”

Maggie says that when you are faced with a cross to bear like brain cancer, it certainly changes your perspective on life. “A terminal illness makes your brain do a 180 on what is important and what isn’t. Before my diagnosis, I let a lot of my vocations slip because of the tyranny of the urgent,” she said. “Now, I am just thankful I can take my dog for a walk. I find myself hoping I get to see another fall because the leaves are so beautiful here in New England. I see my diagnosis as a huge gift because it has enabled me to see things differently.”

Always willing to share her faith, Maggie says to those who are facing a similar situation to look to the cross. “Christ is always there walking with us and holding our hand. He is an expert at facing suffering and death. Death did not hold Jesus, so as baptized children of God, it cannot hold us.”

While a terminal cancer diagnosis has been the largest cross Maggie ever has had to bear, she admits it is not the worst thing that could happen to her. “Losing my faith in God’s control would be the worst thing. A lot of Christians try to wrestle control away from God when they are facing something as serious as terminal cancer. They want to handle it themselves,” explained Maggie. “But, as Christians, we need to remember we are all a part of the Body of Christ. If we try to wrestle that control away, we put ourselves in the position of God. For me, it is peaceful knowing that He is in complete control of my life. Thanks be to God!” **Q**



At the recent LCMS Life Ministries banquet in Washington, D.C., Concordia Theological Seminary Fort Wayne, Indiana, surprised Maggie Karner by awarding her the Doctor of Humane Letters. She is only the third woman in the LCMS to be honored with this award; Dr. Jean Garton and Dr. Rosa Young were other recipients. Go to Maggie's Facebook page to see a video and more.